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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Schmidt, T., & Paterson, M. (2013). A Dialogue on Infection. In L. Keidan, & A. Wright (Eds.), *The Live Art Almanac Volume 3* (pp. 273-284). Oberon Books. <https://www.oberonbooks.com/live-art.html>

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Mary Paterson and Theron Schmidt, 'A Dialogue on Infection', in *The Live Art Almanac Volume 3*, ed. by Lois Keidan and Aaron Wright (London: Oberon/Live Art Development Agency, 2013), pp. 273–84

Originally published on the SPILL Festival website between 18 April–3 May 2011

<http://www.spillfestival.co.uk/programme/spill-speak/spill-stings/>

*The 2011 SPILL Festival of Performance took 'infection' as its curatorial theme. Over the duration of the festival, Mary Paterson and Theron Schmidt wrote letters to each other about this theme in relation to wider contexts of cultural politics, pedagogy, and economics. The letters were published on the SPILL website as part of 'SPILL Stings', a programme of critical writing responding to the festival.*

Theron,

I wanted to send you a collection of ideas around different models of infection and different ways of thinking about it – infection as a political tool, as a disease, as a carrier, a cause, a way of spreading change. But tonight, perhaps I only have time for this: misrecognition and disguise.

I was talking to a neuroscientist friend of mine who told me that there was a high incidence of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in the remote Orkney Islands after the second World War. MS is an auto-immune disease, in which your body starts to attack itself, and it's not contagious. So why was it spreading? One of the reasons is because Orcadians are genetically predisposed to MS (because of their Viking heritage – in fact, a world map of Viking invasions is also a map of MS prevalence). Another reason is because a different virus was being spread among the islands. This different virus appears to be so similar to the body it's infecting, that the body starts to attack its own healthy cells as well as the virus-infected ones. The virus tells the body to misrecognise itself – but this misrecognition is not the virus. The misrecognition is the non-contagious disease, MS.

Because I find it hard to think about the body on a cellular level, I always think of biology inside a metaphor of the social organism. So this got me thinking about civil disobedience, which is a way of misrecognising social norms, or suggesting that they have been misrecognised elsewhere. Someone suggested to me recently that, if constituents in the UK are given the right to recall their MPs, then we should all just recall our MPs, constantly, until the voting system or the social system changes enough for our thoughts and opinions to be reflected in government policy. Civil disobedience is a type of action that is similar to normative social action, but which can cause the larger social body to self-destruct. In order to address the action, the body has to change its own structure and that (depending on your perspective) is terminal.

What I'm interested in here are the differences between actions, causes, symptoms and intent. I wanted to ask you a question about pedagogy – how can you teach without imparting knowledge? It seems like too crude a metaphor to say that teaching is like infecting the mind, but the way someone is taught influences the way they think and communicate. (In this country, the differences in education are manifest in social class, and a certain type of communication is routinely misrecognised as intelligence.)

Anyway, enough for now – I'm too tired to carry on tonight. There was a question in there somewhere!

x M

Dear Mary,

I'm going to start by replying to your last question, because it's a problem that presented itself in a very self-referential way in my own teaching recently. But I also think there's a lot more to say about your ideas about misrecognition and appropriation, and about the relativity of perspective in defining what is damage and what is repair. I hope we come back to these!

You asked: how can you teach without imparting knowledge? This question is at the heart of an influential lecture (and now book) by the philosopher Jacques Rancière on ['The Emancipated Spectator'](#) that has been much in discussion in performance circles – and which also was a text that I set for my final year Performance Philosophy class at King's where I teach. Rancière makes an analogy between the way that spectators are positioned by would-be reformers of the theatre, who set out to help the spectators to escape their passivity or alienation, and the situation of the student with regard to the teacher. The problem with this desire to emancipate the spectator from her own alienation is that it must begin by placing the spectator in the role of the one in need of salvation, the one in the place of ignorance. This is similar to most education, for which the first lesson that the student must learn is the fact of his or her own ignorance and the mastery of the teacher.

In contrast, Rancière refers to the approach to teaching advocated by the late-18th century educationalist Joseph Jacotot, who began with the assumption that everyone (pupil and teacher) has equal intelligence, and equal capacity to make sense of the world, though we all bring different experiences. Another way of thinking about this equality is that we are all equally ignorant; knowledge and intelligence are not the same thing. Rancière applies this to the theatre by arguing that a theatre that sets out to emancipate its spectators is already on the wrong path, because it has already reproduced a set of inequalities between looking and acting, between activity and passivity. Instead, theatre should not assign different value to these different roles, nor indeed should it assume that these roles are distinguishable. This is part of an ongoing theme in Rancière's thinking in which politics is considered as the partitioning and distribution of roles that takes place *prior* to any of the activity that we might typically think of as political, and which largely predetermines what it is possible to see and to hear in that activity.

Okay: that's the theory. But in teaching it to my class – and in explaining it here! – I am nevertheless playing the role of the expert – the one who has the knowledge to impart. I am the one who knows that there are ways of getting Rancière wrong – as indeed I have seen some other performance scholars do – by glossing his title as a call to 'emancipate the spectators'. And so I want to make sure that my students get the theory right! But this was a lesson in which I was very aware of the disjunction between the content of what I was teaching and the way that the teaching took place. It is, ultimately, one of the problems with any theory that advocates a practice that it itself does not follow. And this is why, in a class called 'Performance Philosophy', it feels important that the two terms be equally valued: performance can be capable of philosophising what philosophy cannot perform. In particular, one of the things performance has to 'teach' us is our own ignorance (which is not the same as stupidity!).

I know a little bit about the work in the SPILL Festival that we will see next week, particularly about the four UK commissions, and I'll be interested to see how some of these ideas play themselves out in the situations that they create. For Simon Bowes and [Kings of England](#), for example, I know how much it matters to them that there be a genuine equality between audience and performers – not that they are the same, but that they have parity. He describes this in terms of 'hospitality', which also has interesting connotations in relation to the idea of infection and the role of the host. [Sylvia Rimat's](#) subject is very much communication itself: the way that neural pathways are built and shaped in the

exchange. [Rajni Shah](#) began her work from an exploration of 'not knowing' as a shared (if generally undesirable) cultural state, and as a condition that might be re-valued for its understated political value in the face of experts and leaders seeking to persuade us of their mastery. And [Harminder Judge](#) creates a spectacular image that may be simple in its form, but does not have any simple explanation or lesson to teach – I think it intends us all to be stupefied by it, such that we make of it what we wilt.

But I feel I've strayed somewhat from the question of infection, and of systems and intention. I wonder if we might find our way back by returning to this idea that you raised, that of the 'cultural capital' that accrues with education. This is another concept that presents a paradox when I try to explain it in teaching, as when I illustrate it by saying, 'I, right now, am helping you to be better agents of class-based capitalism!' Is it worth thinking about the kinds of cultural capital that are accumulated and awarded by an institution like the Barbican?

x theron

Hi Theron

I'm going to answer that question by talking about something else to begin with.

The other day I was passing through St. Pancras Station at rush hour and there was a bottleneck outside M&S. It was caused by two pairs of dancers from Sadlers Wells, doing the tango. Groups of commuters and Eurostar travellers stopped to watch and take pictures on their mobile phones, and it was very enjoyable – a beautiful dance, a pleasant diversion, a gentle feeling of togetherness. It also made me think that someone might reasonably look at these badly lit dancers, moving in not-enough-space and accompanied by tinny music, and think it would be a good idea to put them inside a dedicated performance space: somewhere where people could sit in comfort, without diversion; where performers could have all the resources they need.

It's worth remembering that arts venues have a real utility, because institutional critique is so familiar. As art students are routinely taught (inside university institutions), an organisation like the Barbican confers legitimacy and authority on all the works it chooses to show. 'It chooses to show' is an odd phrase, and reveals something of how this authority works – anonymously. It's precisely because there is no single, identifiable decision maker that the artistic programme of an institution like the Barbican can appear to stand for a consensus of opinion, the sedimented achievements of the Barbican's past successes, and the promise of its material presence, all at once.

But the fact that institutional critique is so familiar doesn't make the institution any less powerful, or the ways in which its cultural capital works, any more visible. Perhaps this brings us back to the idea of disguise and misrecognition. Most of the artists in SPILL are interested in the social relationships that surround art – for artists like [Rajni Shah](#) and [Kings of England](#), in fact, this is both the subject and the content of the work. And the festival as a whole sits within a wider artistic trend that validates art according to the nature of the audience experience (as opposed to the artist's skill).

On one hand, art is able to comment on and participate in social relationships because artists don't represent a large institution like the Barbican – they are free agents, seemingly independent of the capitalist drives that shape the rest of our lives, including the baser instincts of the culture business itself. On the other hand, artists are able to do these things because they are artists. And you can tell they're artists because they perform at institutions like the Barbican.

I'm simplifying the argument, of course, but it's a familiar one: institutional critique is performed by and for institutions, who commission artists to act as independent agents, who are then legitimized by the institutions that allow them to carry out institutional critique. We all need each other. And on top of that, it is important to remember that institutions like the Barbican are not only hierarchies of anonymous and naturalised power, but also dedicated performance spaces that allow great art to be made, appreciated and remembered. (Did you know that the Barbican centre is built into the craters of bombs dropped during World War Two?)

I don't think that these things are mutually exclusive, but I do think they sit together uncomfortably. In the case of SPILL, the theme 'infection' stings of something negative – the norm being attacked. But what is the norm, and what is under threat? Both the Barbican and the Festival have acclaimed, international reputations – neither could be called an 'outsider', to each other or to wider society. Does 'infection' symbolise a kind of oppositionality that neither institution can represent? Or does it refer to the state of art in a wider sense – a type of non-productive (in the capitalist sense), social space, like a laboratory for new ideas? Or else, does it work the other way round – perhaps it is the artwork that is infected from elsewhere?

x M

Mary – I'm really excited by what you've written. It took me a second reading before I understood what you're suggesting, but looking at it again this morning I think I get it. Let me attempt to write back to you what I understand you to be getting at, and see whether that is what you're intending.

We're talking here about distributions of power and value. About the way that systems – including buildings, organisations, artforms, and cities – consolidate their value in opposition to other systems. But this is the way of all organisms – and so it is not only understandable, it is necessary. It's a waste of time to wish that the Barbican were less institutional, or that experimental art was more valued within the mainstream, and so on.

Instead, the way you are describing ideas of infection moves us away from an oppositional model – one in which performance work is 'good' because it is supposedly able to create a 'true' equality that is unavailable in our heavily marketised culture, and in which capitalism is 'bad' because it prevents this true communication or equality from emerging. For one thing, such an oppositional model is precisely that which distances art from any impact or efficacy: when the claim to outsider status is the basis of the critique, it at the same time neutralises that critique through its very marginality. (And anyway, this claim to be outside systems of commodification is quite tenuous in itself; Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face...* reminds us that the history of Western art has always been intertwined with systems of power, and it was clear from his own comments that he sees his work as being part of the tradition of religious iconography, not a challenge to it.) As I think you've suggested, there was always something oxymoronic about [institutional critique](#), when it depended upon the institution in order to amplify its critique.

So the idea of infection gets us beyond the opposition between 'good' art and 'bad' institutions of capitalism. In its place, we might start to think about value the extent to which each system infects the other. By opposing them, we insist on their separation; we quarantine each from the other. But by making them permeable, we must also accept that the permeability works both ways, and that infection spreads across both domains. In place of terms such as critique, autonomy, and perhaps even radicalism, an emphasis on infection would start to value a new set of terms such as permeability, transmission, and communicability. What does it mean for this work of art to be here, in this part of

the city, at this time? How might we think about audiences as carriers, valuing not only what they bring from the art experience to whatever day jobs they may have, but also what they carry with them when they come into the art space? Can we think about the role of art not in terms of its ability to infect, but to be infected? To be a space where infection happens, not necessarily the virus itself?

Looking back at your letter, I notice that I'm just providing variations on the questions you were asking at the end – but I had to find my own way there.

x thearon

Hi Theron,

Yes, that's it exactly – although you have articulated it much more fully than I could. It reminds me of [Martin Creed's neon sign](#) that was hung over the entrance to Tate Britain a few years ago:

the whole world + the work = the whole world

Our actions – as audiences, artists, workers, friends, citizens, dissidents – permeate the world that we live in and are permeated by the world. What I like about this equation is that 'the work' is an addition to the world and part of it at the same time. Art can introduce something completely new to the system, and it *is* the system.

I like your questions: 'Can we think about the role of art not in terms of its ability to infect, but to be infected? To be a space where infection happens, not necessarily the virus itself?' In this year's SPILL, there were (at least) two contrasting versions of how to set up a space for infection.

Firstly, there was Rajni Shah's *Glorious*, a production that literally creates an alternative social space. I've been involved in *Glorious* for over a year now – working on a publication that will document and reflect on the making process, and which will be published at the end of the tour. So I have been able to observe the development of the show, including the relationships the company forms with performers and musicians at each venue (before the premiere in London, there was a preview of *Glorious* in Nottingham).

I was about to write, 'and this means I have no critical distance', which is of course true, but also more interesting than it sounds. Leaving aside the problem with the term 'critical distance' (which is a fallacy), I have an unusually emotional relationship with *Glorious* – something more than wishing a company well, or hoping for the professional success of my friends and colleagues in the normal way. *Glorious* is about social connections, and it is a model of social connectivity. There is a deep, embedded concern with (positive) relationships at the heart of *Glorious*, and this attitude permeates every aspect of the production – from the homemade cakes baked for the launch of the project, to the interventions carried out by the cast in order to find new performers, to the invitation to the audience at the end of the show. The result of all this 'work' exceeds the event of performance and is manifest in the nexus of relationships between the people involved. But also, importantly, it is manifest in the potential of future relationships in the same model.

The political philosopher [Brian Massumi](#) describes the nature of perception as a dance between potentiality and possibility. The crux of his argument is this: you cannot perceive an object without entering into a relationship with it; your relationship with the object is based on what you already know; therefore, your perception of the object is driven (but not determined) by what you have perceived

before. Knowledge, then, is not something that builds up like a wall. Instead, it accumulates in a circular motion, bringing a bit of the past into the present in order to guess the future. And this is the infectious quality of *Glorious*: it introduces a pattern of behaviour that grows as and because it is spread by the actions (as opposed to the effects) of the people who take part. Does this make it the environment or the virus? Or both? Perhaps the show is the moment of ‘actualised potentiality’ (to use Massumi’s term), when all the possibilities of perception converge on a single event: infection. And the making process is the steady, circular growth of connectivity, which changes your relationship with the world forever: infectious conditions.

In contrast, Romeo Castellucci’s show in SPILL, *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*, does not take a gradual approach. Instead, the piece juxtaposes a set of strong, resonant images and symbols, and leaves the audience to find a way through. How do you understand the modern relationship between a father and son, alongside the monumental, Renaissance-imagined face of Christ? Incontinence alongside holiness? Domesticity and religious majesty? Theatrical realism and physical spectacle? You – or at least I – don’t. Instead, I watch and absorb what I can of the performance. Afterwards, I find that the images (and in this case, the smells) of Castellucci’s work stay with me, and begin to make connections with other things in my life. Castellucci does not exactly invite the audience into a conversation, but he does start a dialogue which, like *Glorious*, exceeds the event of the show, and adds to the world at the same time as it slips into it. Full with intensity and utterly complete, *On the Concept of the Face* feels separate to the world in a way that *Glorious* does not, but in fact it grows into wider experience in a similar way. Or at least, in a similar environment. Perhaps the difference is that Castellucci subverts the order of things: first comes the infection and then, paradoxically, the infectious condition.

And yet there doesn’t need to be a defining difference. One of the problems with language is that it has a linear direction (at least, our language does), which is tricky when you’re talking about processes that are gradual, circular, spreading. So I will draw a circle and take Walt Whitman’s advice (‘Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)’). I like to think of art as a testing ground for cultural exchange: a place to reflect, resist or reciprocate the advances of culture. I don’t believe that bald oppositionality is an effective strategic position, because it carries a high risk of over-simplification. Although it’s useful to describe Rajni Shah and Romeo Castellucci in contrast, in fact they are part of the same cultural space, which is to say, they are both (re)active agents in the world. When I remember each piece, I remember being involved in the same type of viewing: a quiet, still, reflective audience, which breathes in and out with the performance, breathes it in.

X M

Dear Mary,

It’s interesting to see how this dialogue has returned us to some of the same questions that we were asking as writers, in a different configuration, at the last SPILL festival: [questions](#) of [porosity](#), of text (and responsiveness in general) that is permeable and transformed by the encounter. And these questions, of course, are part of a larger continuum of ideas about textuality, such as Umberto Eco’s idea of the ‘[open work](#)’, or Roland Barthes’ distinction between ‘[readerly](#)’ and ‘[writerly](#)’ texts. But I sometimes get frustrated with those arguments, particularly when they tend toward (what I perceive) as a fetishisation of formalism, of trying to ‘break’ texts so that they allow gaps for the reader – but also



(when done gracelessly) doing so in a way that is just as prescriptive and closed as a traditional text with regard to the capabilities of the reader.

At any rate, what I find interesting about where you are taking the conversation is that the qualities of permeability and inclusivity, as you are describing them, have less to do with the formal properties of the work itself and more to do with the context. What we bring to the work, and the way in which the work introduces itself to us, *is* part of the work. When I put it that way, I know it sounds obvious – that our expectations shape our experiences. But while it may be obvious if one thinks of the experience in simple terms such as ‘liking it’ or ‘not liking it’, I think that one of the things that this week at the Barbican has explored is that there are multiple vectors of approach to the work, multiple ways of even thinking about what it is to approach the work, and the festival has been designed to explore these peripheral encounters as well.

Someone might only see the projected SPILL logo as they pass through the Barbican. Or wander into the [Tarot exhibition](#), which feels like a series of performances suspended in mid-act, at the same time as it functions cumulatively as a collection. You might lean over the balcony and catch a glimpse of Robert talking with Diamanda Galás, and never see her film collaboration. Or you might join the circle for one of [Oreet \[Ashery\]’s conversations with Uma \[Bunnag Blacker\]](#), [conversations which took place at 5pm every day in a public space in the Barbican,] or one of the other Salons. I like the way that these hover in between public and private events, each with their own properties of inclusivity and exclusivity. For example, the circle of chairs at the Salon establishes everyone in the Salon as more-or-less equal, but there were always people drifting in and out at the perimeter, or people who wandered up late who may have found the circle to be a closed boundary. I think that’s okay. I think nothing is ever purely ‘open’ – instead, the question is ‘open to what?’ Which will always mean, closed to something else. What’s important is to keep shifting these sets of openness and closure, rather than to assume (wrongly) that one has achieved equality of access. In the Salons, then, to be open to a space of respectful dialogue, and of sustained conversation, necessarily also means to be closed to arbitrary interruption.

One of my favourite of the SPILL formats, in this regard, is the SPILL Feasts. Robert told me how these were inspired by a theatre he had visited – I think it might have been the Stuk in Leuven – in which everyone associated with the centre eats together each day: artists, technicians, administrators. There’s something obviously egalitarian about this impulse – we all have an equal need for sustenance, and we are all entitled to an equal place at the table. But this activity of eating together is never experienced neutrally or as a tabula rasa – as food scholar Martin Jones spoke about in his little post-meal talk at this year’s Feast, when he described the ways in which the activity of feasting reinforced distributions of power in medieval times, or the historical invention of the table-setting customs that we still observe. To me, [this year’s Feast](#) felt more like everyone involved was already a professional, rather than the mix of audiences with arts professionals that characterised the 2009 Feasts – which might have been due to this year’s afternoon setting, or the overabundance of activity during the Festival, or the benefit that the previous Feasts had through their partnership with [New Work Network](#) (which recently lost its regular public funding) and [Artsadmin](#). But even so, I think there’s something important about just knowing that the Feast is happening, even if one doesn’t choose to attend. It’s a sign of a commitment to a particular form of openness, of availability. It says that there are many ways to approach the work, which might include personal encounter with the artists, or participation in a discussion, or just buying your ticket, showing up, and walking away into the night.

I’ve also been thinking about these ideas in relation to this particular format of writing that we have been observing: the letter. Again, what I think is distinctive about this dialogue is not its formal properties as an object, but the context that it both draws upon and generates. I mean: these letters between us, as textual objects, are not really that different from other kinds of critical writing. It helps



me formulate my thoughts to be responding to you, but it's not a 'real' letter, whatever that would be, in that I'm always aware that there are other readers. To be sure, it makes a difference to me (and to the tone with which I write) to think of this as a letter, but it's not a radical difference. Where a more significant difference occurs, I think, is for those external readers, people other than you and me, who approach this through the frame of it being a dialogue. What properties, other than formal ones, does that idea start to produce? Perhaps that there is something about kindness and generosity going on here, in the exchange between two friends, that accompanies our attempts to articulate ideas. Or indeed that there is something both open and closed – an openness between you and me, who are engaging in this act based on mutual trust and respect, which is also opened out in a slightly different way to the readers we can only imagine – and which is also closed. Robert told me that he wanted to comment on one of our previous dialogues, but wasn't sure of the etiquette, as it was framed as a personal correspondence. What would it do to interrupt with his own voice? Would he be intruding? Or is it really open?

This old-fashioned form, the letter. Is it a coincidence that I see it everywhere this festival? You talked about *Glorious*, which begins with Rajni and her team asking strangers in the street to stop and write a letter to someone they will never meet, and to take a letter in return. And this format is adopted by the theatrical work, as well, as Rajni sings some of her letters, and the 'non-performers/performers' (as [Maddy \[Hodge - one of the other SPILL Stings writers\] called them](#)) also read aloud from texts that are structured as letters. I know Collin, one of the performers, and I know Ghalib, to whom his letter is addressed, and to be witness to his letter – even though I know it is only a performance artifice – moves me to tears. For me, these start when he walks up to the microphone and says, 'Hi Ghalib.'

Or when I meet some of the artists from GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN at one of the networking events, they tell me about a [letter-writing project](#) that they have been engaged with alongside making their future work. There's something different again about these letters: they are written between three people, which unsettles the format (in a good way!), and the first one begins with an acknowledgement that the project is a kind of theft and an awareness that it has a public readership. The chronology of these letters is important – you have to read them in the right order, and they refer to themselves, and to the way they mark a particular process, and are filled with anticipation of the future – so to approach them from the outside is to be aware of my own position in relation to them.

Or Leisa Shelton's remarkable gesture with her [Open Letter to 100 Australian Artists](#). Leisa was invited to SPILL in order to say something about 'the state of the arts' in Australia. She threw the question open, turning her presentation slot into an open conduit for the voices of others. She wrote to 100 artists and arts professionals, inviting them to submit words or images or whatever. By the time of the presentation, she had 38 responses, and those of us who were there used them as the basis for the conversation. One of the things this does is start to establish some common themes and points for comparison: questions of sustainability, and proximity to power (in both countries, opera is by far the most highly subsidised art form), and that strange dynamic by which it is easier to get funding to bring artists from overseas than to get funding in one's own country. But this format also opens up the space to talk about conversation itself: who responded to the call? Who didn't? Whose voices are we hearing? And who is keeping silent? We talk about self-organising networks, generational shifts, and questions of identity and identification. Rather than being definitive, this dialogue is generative.

I'm drifting here, and so maybe that's a sign that I should bring this to a close. We've agreed that these will be our final reflections on the festival, and so maybe that's why I'm a little reluctant to end – I want to keep the space open, keep trying to fit in all that I didn't get to say: about conversation, and infection, and kindness, and generosity. About reciprocity rather than equality, which is what I took away from Kings of England and from *Glorious*, and about the work of hospitality – the work that begins before the work begins. But maybe rather than give myself the last word, I will give these to those other curious

voices that have been participating in this dialogue. No one else has heard them, as I've been filtering them out – but all along this writing, we've been accompanied by automated bots, trying to add their comments, in the hope that the comment will be approved and along with it an accompanying link to cheap trainers, or pharmaceuticals, or financial information. These too are a kind of infection, but I like the way they try to proceed: through kindness. Here is some of what they say:

*It is rare to find educated people about this topic, but you seem like you are aware of what you are posting about! Bless you*

*I really knew about nearly all of this, but with that in mind, I still considered it had been helpful. Excellent post!*

*If you could e-mail me with a few suggestions on just how you made your blog look this excellent, I would be grateful.*

*Terrific work! This is the type of information that should be shared around the web. Shame on the search engines for not positioning this post higher!*

*Bless you for trying to describe the terminology for the noobs!*

*I would really like to say thanks very much for that job you have made in writing this post. I am hoping the same most effective work from you down the road also.*

Thank you, Mary. Thank you, readers. And thank you, bots. I'll do my best down the road.

x theron